



# Susan NORRIE

*Story* **SASKIA BEUDEL**  
*Photography* **ANNA KUCERA**

ORIGINALLY TRAINED AS A PAINTER, SUSAN NORRIE IS NOW RENOWNED INTERNATIONALLY FOR HER MOVING IMAGE PRACTICE THAT EXPLORES THEMES OF ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER, HUMAN CULPABILITY AND RESILIENCE, AND THE REDEMPTIVE POTENTIAL OF NEW SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERIES AND TECHNOLOGIES.



When Susan Norrie won an Australia Council Visual Arts Award in 2019 acknowledging her major contribution to Australian contemporary art and broader cultural life, she was unequivocal in declaring the central concerns of her practice.

‘We are at a critical moment in the history of the world. As an artist whose work has focused on catastrophic environmental consequences associated with human greed and a rampant desire for dominance over finite natural resources, I believe it is our responsibility to document the truths and impact of these endeavours. I recognise the significance of the artist’s ability to witness and probe this world with a certain poetic detachment that not only unravels truths but does so with powerful words and compelling imagery,’ she wrote.

When we meet in Potts Point, Sydney, for an interview, I ask Norrie what drew her away from painting to her more experimental approach that incorporates art, documentary and film.

‘I consider myself an issues-based artist rather than an ideas-based artist. I work with the medium that best suits the piece of work. My paintings always had storylines and film was part of that; it informed the paintings. So it was a natural transition. I copped flack about it in the 1990s. You were meant to be trained in a certain tradition and then you stayed in that tradition. But I think of myself as an artist; not a ‘painter’ or a ‘video artist’ or a ‘moving image artist.’

Norrie counts avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas as a major influence, along with Werner Herzog, Stan Douglas, Steve McQueen and Rosemary Trockel. Her six-channel video installation, *Undertow* (2002) was the first major culmination of her more cross-genre work. It was commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) in Melbourne, and curator Juliana Engberg notes that she invited Norrie ‘to undertake the task of breaking in the new ACCA.’

‘Did the large-scale dimensions of the ACCA space play a role in shaping *Undertow*?’ I ask Norrie. ‘Absolutely,’ she replies. ‘It was a turning point in my career.’

Incorporating Greenpeace footage of oil spills, Bureau of Meteorology film of the infamous 1983 Melbourne dust storm, and Norrie’s own imagery of New Zealand landscapes where seismic activity is so close to the surface, *Undertow* inaugurated the kind of work Norrie is now best known for. It is at once dystopic, poetic, haunting, visceral with its clouds of vapour and smoke, popping mud puddles, viscous oil, burning birch forests, Melbourne’s daytime streets thrown into preternatural darkness like a future-now apocalypse that calls into question human culpability in environmental disaster.

It also launched Norrie’s fascination with the role of science and scientists as we lurch towards global environmental and human catastrophe through anthropogenic climate change. New space-age technologies (such as greenhouse gas monitoring satellites) figure across her work as at once filled with redemptive possibility, a technological sublime, and inbuilt with a certain kind of impotence – futile unless their lodes of data are acted upon – and perhaps as fumbling and unknowing at foretelling and dealing with disaster as any other mode.

Many of the same visual and thematic motifs thread through a number of her subsequent works: *HAVOC* (2006–07) created for the fifty-second Venice Biennale, and its companion piece *aftermath* (2016) commissioned by the Ian Potter Museum of Art in Melbourne; *Shot* (2009) exhibited at the Edinburgh International Festival; *Transit* (2011) first shown at the Yokohama Triennale in Japan and later co-purchased by Tate Modern in London and Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art Australia.

These works are the result of an ongoing engagement on Norrie’s part with sites in Japan and Indonesia. *HAVOC* and *aftermath* dwell in the ruined landscape of the so-called Lusi mud volcano in Java, Indonesia. Once the site of a gas exploration well in the hands of oil and gas companies including PT Lapindo Brantas and Australia-based Santos Ltd, it erupted in May 2006 and has continued erupting ever since, drowning houses, factories, places of worship, schools and, not least, fields and waterways that support local people’s livelihoods. Norrie is far from alone in believing that inadequate drilling practices triggered the eruption.

In 2009 Norrie returned to her projects in Japan. *Shot* is based on JAXA’s activities on the island of Tanegashima where the IBUKI satellite was launched. IBUKI was the greenhouse gas observing satellite aimed at measuring levels of carbon dioxide and methane at 56,000 locations around the world – the first satellite able to gather such detailed information. As one interviewee observes, it has the capacity to measure methane gas leaks in natural gas pipelines across the world and to get that information quickly to companies and countries that control them. The final scene of *Shot* shows a rocket launch, bursting through cloud and Earth’s atmosphere to the awed murmurs and admiring calls of a crowd of spectators. It is a hopeful work but loaded, too, with a question that has plagued climate scientists since at least the 1990s. ‘We’re using the latest technology to get better and better data,’ says one voice in *Shot*. ‘The question is, are people going to be satisfied with the evidence to then do something about the problems.’

01 Susan Norrie, 2019, with her work *HAVOC*, 2006–2007, 16-channel video installation, Palazzo Giustinian Lolini 52nd Venice Biennale, photograph Anna Kucera

02–04 *Spheres of Influence* (stills), 2016–2019, single-channel video, commissioned by the Australian War Memorial Museum, Canberra



02



03



I was born into a large family. We'd start working at a very young age. I started working when I was six, maybe nine.

04



*Transit* (2011), a single-channel video projection, extends this theme of cutting-edge technologies with redemptive capacities. The camera lingers almost lovingly on a rocket launch, tracing its long disappearance to a bright speck among the clouds, a trail of vapour twisted like an umbilical cord hanging in its wake. Sequences interplay between rockets, U.S. Air Force activities, and Sakurajima volcano erupting prior to the 2011 Tohoku earthquake with its dire consequences of tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear power plant meltdown. Norrie explains that these disasters occurred after she had already begun work on *Transit*. 'I couldn't not include the earthquake and tsunami but I also had to find a way to incorporate all the work I'd already done.'

*Transit* doesn't explicitly deal with Fukushima. Rather, the camera plays across detritus and ruin left by the tsunami – another aftermath – and across the faces and words of anti-nuclear

protesters (a theme also taken up in *Dissent*, 2014). 'I had always thought that Japan had complete control of its technology. But Fukushima changed all that,' Norrie says.

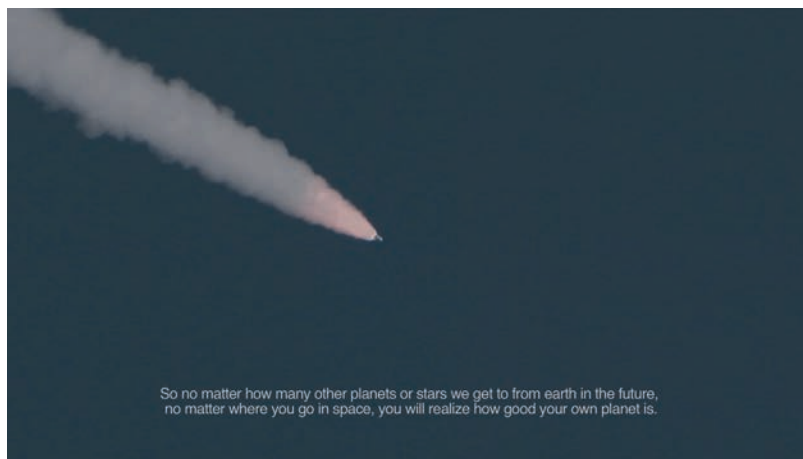
'How did you manage to capture Sakurajima's eruption?' I ask her. 'Was it just fluke, through having spent so much time filming there?' Her answer is startling. 'No I predicted it through meteorological information. I worked it out and took the team there, and I was right. It did erupt. They all thought I was a bit of a witch actually. But you can't say that. You don't want to be seen as chasing misery.'

Her words suggest a fierce intelligence and a practice that is acutely immersed in and alert to the world and its serendipities, major events both social/political and natural coalescing and assembling in her work.

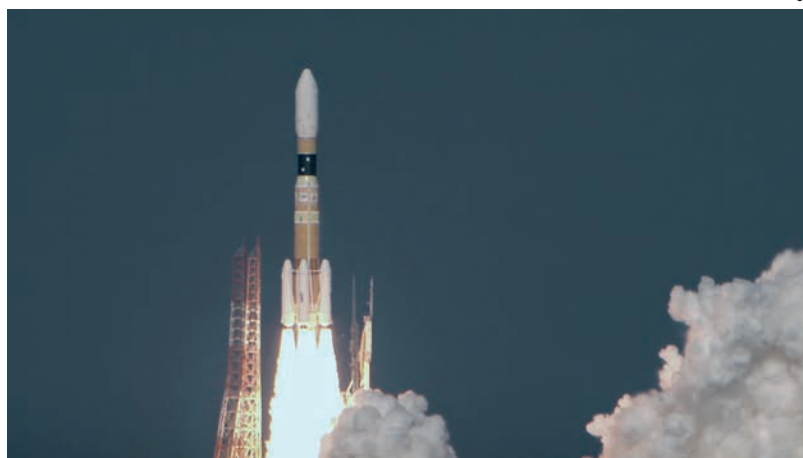


05

*Transit* includes the words of shaman Yoshimaru Higa, thus intertwining very different modalities of understanding and handling nature and disaster. 'When it was shown at the Yokohama Triennale, I didn't realise at first how well received it was. No other artists were really working with this material, it's as if these things weren't happening.' *Transit*, like her other works, has a quiet, intensified, immersive but troubling beauty – with its leisurely opening shots of a rocket preparing to launch, an expectant crowd waiting in darkness, the fierce crackling of matter transforming as the rocket disappears into space, and its closing scenes of the volcano eruption. In effect, the trigger to disaster is placed at the end of the sequence rather than the beginning, as if reversing time and its unforeseen consequences. The final scenes show two brightly lit pleasure boats passing in the night, gliding silently through dark waters beneath the shadowy volcano, illuminated briefly by exploding fireworks showering earthward.



06



07

Her most recent project, *Spheres of Influence* (2016–19) is a major commission by the Australian War Memorial in Canberra derived from ten days on the ground at Camp Taji outside Baghdad in Iraq. The work is yet to be shown publicly.

Camp Taji is a U.S. base where Australian, British, French and American units train Iraqi soldiers. There are strict controls on what kind of imagery can be aired.

In the Potts Point cafe Norrie shows me though scenes of everyday life in the camp, and of her central protagonist, Salah Al Hamdani, an Iraqi poet who has been living in Paris for forty years and who

05 *aftermath* (still), 2016, two-channel video, commissioned by the Ian Potter Museum, University of Melbourne  
 06-07 *Transit* (stills), 2011, single-channel digital video, colour, sound, 14:35 minutes, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia and Tate, purchased jointly with funds provided by the Qantas Foundation, 2016





08

trained at Camp Taji. The work is structured around the Treaty of Versailles understood as the major cause of war in the Middle East through its redrawing and imposition of national boundaries.

'It took me two years to get permission for Hamdani to enter Versailles,' Norrie says. As he strolls among its sumptuous architecture he reflects on a childhood of poverty where military training was one of few viable professional opportunities, and of politics and life in France. Norrie brings into constellation a major centre of political decision-making and power in the global North and its consequences across time in distant locales. Like the words of Yoshimaru Higa in *Transit*, Hamdani's words cohere and prompt across this new work, providing fragments of reflective history spoken by one of those who have lived the minutiae and fallout of the Treaty.

Unlike in Japan and Indonesia, where Norrie worked with a team of camera people, interpreters and translators, in Camp Taji she did all her own camerawork. 'I discovered I'm actually quite good at it. I mean, I would never claim to be a cinematographer, but I'm good at it.' She plans to do more in the future. 'But I'm not sure yet what the next project will be. I often shape my work around invitations and commissions. So we'll see.'

As we wind up our conversation, I say to Norrie that as increasing numbers of artists and writers around the world grapple with the theme of environmental crisis, *Undertow* now reads as something of a precursor, ahead of its time. 'What was prompting you back then, almost two decades ago?'

'The world seemed to be going crazy about oil. And Japan was like a hothouse. It was a heating world. Plus I've always had a fascination with the environment as all-consuming, all-powerful.' Her words are a reminder that no matter how much humans try to exert control over nature, it has the capacity – as we are now learning more acutely than ever – to speak back and respond in ungovernable ways (fire, flood, eruption, drought, dust, desertification, mud).

Whatever her new project turns out to be, it's sure to have the same kind of prescience and acute engagement with our times and geo-political region as her work to date – bearing witness to injustices, and finding the capacity 'to see worlds within worlds' as Norrie puts it.

For days after viewing her works, their images and sounds linger with me as a kind of haunting and as a condensation of our troubled world. 'I like to document things that are disappearing,' she says. 'Also being angry is not always such a bad thing. You don't always know what's not going to be there tomorrow.' ■

[susannorrie.com](http://susannorrie.com)

---

08 *Undertow* (still), 2002, 6-channel video installation, commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and the International Festival, Melbourne

Courtesy the artist, Annette Larkin, Sydney, the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney and the Australian War Memorial, Canberra